

5 **A METHOD, ARTICLE OF MANUFACTURE, AND PROCESSING
DEVICE FOR PROVIDING PROMOTIONS OVER A NETWORK USING
AN ALPHANUMERIC SEQUENCE FROM A PRODUCT**

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15 **Claim of Priority**

20 The present Application claims priority to U.S. Provisional
Application Serial No. 60/267,585, entitled PROMOTION SERVICE
PROVIDER, filed on February 9, 2001.

25 **Field of the Invention**

The present invention is directed toward providing promotions using
a network, such as the Internet or a cellular network.

30 **Background of the Invention**

Advertisers, retailers and manufacturers provide consumers with
incentives (e.g., "money saving" coupons, loyalty programs, discount offers,
interactive activities and games) to encourage consumers to purchase
products. For example, a company can provide, by way of mass mailings
or through printed media, coupons or discount sales offers to provide the
recipients with a strong incentive to purchase the company's products.
Some advertisers mail direct payments to consumers (e.g., dollar bills,

5 checks, or rebates). The consumer can use these direct payments to help
pay for purchasing the advertiser's goods, or to purchase other related or
unrelated goods or services. The primary drawback for the advertiser is
lack of efficiency and customer interaction. The advertisements are
delivered to many consumers who may have no interest in purchasing the
10 products being advertised.

The Internet is a medium that reaches millions of people all over the
world, and includes technology that is capable of targeting information
directly to the individual consumer. This creates the potential to transform
the interaction between consumer and advertiser and make the advertising
15 process considerably more efficient.

Existing Internet-associated promotional systems deliver their
promotional material over the Internet, often to consumers targeted by their
demographic profile or patterns on web usage. However, these rely on the
consumer to reach the online outlet of promotions or merchants on their
20 own.

SUMMARY

According to an embodiment of the present invention, a method,
article of manufacture, including a computer readable medium, and a
system, including a processing device, provides promotions over the
25 Internet. In an embodiment of the present invention, a first entity (which in
one example is an offline brand) distributes a product with an alphanumeric
sequence. In an embodiment of the present invention, the alphanumeric

5 sequence is hidden from view until the product is purchased. For example,
the alphanumeric sequence is positioned on the inside of packaging.
When a consumer purchases the product, the consumer can view the
alphanumeric sequence. Printed with the alphanumeric sequence is an
address on the Internet in an embodiment of the present invention. The
10 user can enter the address into a browser and access the addressed page,
which in an embodiment of the present invention is part of the first entity's
web page. The consumer selects a link indicating a desire to redeem a
known or unknown value, such as an electronic coupon, using the
alphanumeric sequence. The consumer is directed to a web page that
15 provides a means to enter the alphanumeric sequence, personal
information and answers to survey questions. After the alphanumeric
sequence is validated, the consumer is provided with a value and possibly
other prizes. In an embodiment of the present invention, the value includes
an electronic coupon for shopping at an online store. An electronic coupon
20 is passed onto the online store in order for the consumer to receive a
discount. In an embodiment of the present invention, the values are not
accumulated or combined.

In an embodiment of the present invention, a method for providing a
promotion comprises the steps of obtaining a product having an
25 alphanumeric sequence and entering the alphanumeric sequence supplied
with the product into a web site. The alphanumeric sequence is validated
and an electronic coupon associated with the alphanumeric sequence is

5 awarded. An item is chosen and purchased. The item is discounted based on the electronic coupon.

 In an embodiment of the present invention, the validating step includes decoding the alphanumeric code to determine an associated electronic coupon.

10 In still another embodiment of the present invention, the method further comprises the step of collecting information from a buyer of the item.

 In an embodiment of the present invention, the information is used for marketing purposes.

 In an embodiment of the present invention, the choosing step
15 includes accessing an online retailer web site or an electronic warehouse.

 In an embodiment of the present invention, a method for providing a promotion comprises the step of applying an alphanumeric sequence to a product by a first retailer and selling the product by the first retailer to a user. A web site on a first retailer processing device is accessed by a user
20 processing device. The user enters the alphanumeric sequence supplied with the product into a web page of the web site. The alphanumeric sequence is validated and an electronic coupon is awarded. A web site on a second retailer processing device is accessed by the user processing device. The user chooses and purchases an item. The item is discounted
25 based on the electronic coupon.

5 According to an embodiment of the present invention, the electronic coupon can be increased responsive to the product being purchased during a predetermined period of time.

 According to an embodiment of the present invention, the electronic coupon can be increased responsive to the product being purchased in a
10 predetermined geographic area.

 According to an embodiment of the present invention, the electronic coupon can be increased responsive to the user answering a question.

 According to an embodiment of the present invention, the electronic coupon can be increased responsive to a predetermined date.

15 According to an embodiment of the present invention, the awarding the coupon step includes awarding a prize.

 According to an embodiment of the present invention, the awarding the coupon step includes providing the second retailer that will redeem the coupon.

20 According to an embodiment of the present invention, the awarding the coupon step includes providing a user with an opportunity to enter a sweepstake contest.

 According to an embodiment of the present invention, the awarding the coupon step includes providing the user with a visual game piece

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5 associated with the alphanumeric sequence. The user wins a prize in response to obtaining a plurality of predetermined visual game pieces.

According to an embodiment of the present invention, an article of manufacture includes a computer readable medium comprising a first software component for providing a value responsive to receiving an alphanumeric sequence from a first product. A second software component
10 directs a user to a web site for purchasing a second product. A third software component allows for purchasing the second product using the value.

According to another embodiment of the present invention, the computer readable medium is positioned in a processing device coupled to
15 the Internet and a client processing device access the processing device.

Other aspects and advantages of the present invention can be seen upon review of the figures, the detailed description, and the claims that follow.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

Fig. 1 is a block diagram of a system according to embodiment of the present invention.

Fig. 2 is a block diagram of a processing device according to an
25 embodiment of the present invention.

Fig. 3 is a flow chart describing a method according to an embodiment of the present invention.

5 Fig. 4 is a block diagram of software components according to an
embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

I. Overview

10 A Promotion Service Provider ("PSP") system 38, as illustrated in
Fig. 1, empowers an entity, such as a manufacture, distributor, retailer
and/or advertiser, with a plug-and-play, Internet-based promotions
infrastructure that allows them to offer real value, such as coupons, money
and prizes, to their consumers in an embodiment of the present invention.
15 System 38 allows manufactures, distributors, retailers and/or advertisers to
launch a variety of promotion programs (offline-to-online cross-promotions,
loyalty, sweepstakes, instant win, collect-and-get and games) to achieve
specific marketing goals. Back-end technology maintains all the data
gathering, storing and accountability for all programs. As a result, a
20 promotion can be developed in a matter of weeks instead of months.

Manufactures, distributors, retailers and/or advertisers are also able
access to powerful consumer relationship management features, such as
targeted email marketing and ad serving, reporting and data analysis tools,
and the ability to further develop consumer relationships and gain valuable
25 insights. The end result is a fully branded Internet front-end that is flexible
enough to achieve a brand's specific marketing and promotional goals,
whether they be trial, repeat purchase or longer-term loyalty.

5 Manufactures, distributors, retailers and/or advertisers have several choices regarding the implementation of a PSP system 38. An entity can choose to integrate their web site with a PSP system 38 back-end technology, ensuring a seamless promotional program that maintains the navigation and functionality of the entity's own web site. This guarantees a
10 fully branded consumer experience. Alternatively, for entities that do not have an Internet presence or web site, or choose not to launch promotions from their home page, a promotion provider can develop a unique gateway for the program through a promotion provider's web site (i.e., www.softcoin.com/brand).

15 A PSP system 38 serves as the launching pad and powers the promotion program's functionality. Entities can turn on and off any of these promotion features, depending on the type of programs desired during a specific period of time. Key features of system 38 include system security and consumer privacy, "Powered By" functionality, front-end branding,
20 alphanumeric sequence generating and decoding algorithms, easy integration with an entities own site and online retail sites, and in-house customer support including live chat customer service features.

System 38 functions are performed partially or completely by PSP software 40 illustrated in Fig. 4. In an embodiment of the present invention,
25 software components referenced in Fig. 4 represent a software program, a software object, a software function, a software subroutine, a software method, a software instance, and a code fragment, singly or in

5 combination. In an alternate embodiment, functions performed by software components illustrated in Fig. 4 are carried out completely or partially by hardware.

In an embodiment of the present invention, PSP software 40, or components of software 40, is stored in an article of manufacture, such as
10 a computer readable medium. For example, software 40 is stored in a magnetic hard disk, an optical disk, a floppy disk, CD-ROM (Compact Disk Read-Only Memory), RAM (Random Access Memory), FLASH, ROM (Read-Only Memory), or other readable or writeable data storage technologies, singly or in combination. In an embodiment of the present
15 invention, PSP software is stored in memory 52 illustrated in Fig. 2. In an alternate embodiment of the present invention, software components of PSP software 40 are distributed to multiple memory locations in PSP system 38.

20 II. Cross Promotions Engine

Instant and direct rewards are valuable volume-driving incentives for consumer brands. Cross Promotions Engine software component 41, illustrated in Fig. 4, allow entities to use the power of the Internet to create promotional programs based on monetary rewards. Using this capability,
25 entities give money to their consumers in the form of alphanumeric sequences (as in- or on-packs, or any other distribution means) that are redeemable at partnering online retailers or at an interactive warehouse

5 created for the program. This is a win-win enabling technology, as offline brands drive sales volume at their traditional channels and online retail partners receive increased qualified buying traffic to their sites, in addition to offline exposure.

Cross Promotion Engine software component works as follows: An
10 entity, such as an offline retailer, delivers an alphanumeric sequence to consumers through an offline delivery mechanism (such as in-pack printing, stickers or cards). Each alphanumeric sequence has a specific value at targeted and synergistic online retailers partnered with offline retailer or at an electronic warehouse. Alphanumeric sequences are activated at a
15 "promotion gateway," a fully branded web site, integrated with the entities own web site, where consumers create an account, answer survey questions designed by the brand, and redeem their value at the online retail partners or electronic warehouses through proxying technology described in "Method And System For Proxying Web Pages", by Bunger, et al., U.S.
20 Patent Application No. 60/193,880, filed on March 31, 2000, incorporated herein by reference.

A back-end system that supports Cross Promotions Engine software component 41 creates and handles the unique promotional alphanumeric sequences, which consumers can easily activate and redeem in order to
25 take advantage of the promotion. During the promotional period, PSP system 38 collects valuable consumer information for the promotional partners, while at all times maintaining consumer privacy and a secure

5 transactional process. This feature integrates with the platform to produce
a seamless, fully branded redemption experience, launched from the
entities own site or from a site created for the program.

III. Strategic Loyalty Engine

10 A loyalty program traditionally gives entities having brands the
opportunity to create a long-term relationship with their consumers by
giving them rewards based on purchased volumes over a period of time.
The Internet is the ideal tool to manage a loyalty program. It allows
consumers to easily accumulate and redeem value, and allows managers
15 to easily administer and monitor a program based on business objectives
and dynamic rules.

A Strategic Loyalty Engine software component 42, as illustrated in
Fig. 4, is a flexible solution that an entity can use to create and power its
own loyalty program. It is a technology that empowers entities to cover all
20 aspects of an Internet-based loyalty initiative. PSP system 38 is flexible
enough to allow brands to deliver many forms of value, such as instant
money, sweepstakes, instant wins, collect-and-get and games. By having
Strategic Loyalty Engine software component 42 interact with the other
promotion functionalities, an entity is able to create a fully dynamic loyalty
25 program that adapts to seasonality and changes in business objectives.

Strategic Loyalty Engine software component 42 is based on
alphanumeric sequences, delivered to consumers via the purchase of a

5 product. These alphanumeric sequences can represent value in many
forms that range from monetary (currency based) to non-monetary
(currency indifferent). Consumers go to an entities site to activate these
alphanumeric sequences and add them to an account. Consumers can
then convert their accumulated alphanumeric sequences into Internet
10 money or other prize premiums as they reach pre-determined conversion
levels based on the brand's business and volume-driving objectives.
Additionally, this feature allows managers to use dynamic business rules to
adapt the conversion rates to specific needs. For example, consumers can
receive bonus value for buying specific SKUs, buying the product during a
15 specific time window, performing viral marketing or answering a survey.
The system can also read account activity on special occasions (like
birthdays) and award bonuses based on that information. On the
redemption side, the loyalty program can be combined with other promotion
features, so that in addition to regular value-conversion, sweepstakes or
20 gaming elements can be incorporated to enrich the consumer experience
by expanding the choices for conversion and redemption.

In an alternate embodiment of the present invention, values
associated with alphanumeric sequences are not accumulated.

Strategic Loyalty Engine software component 42 the loyalty engine
25 functions on the principles of alphanumeric sequences accumulation and
dynamic business rules for redemption in an embodiment of the present
invention. Strategic Loyalty Engine software component 42 allows

5 consumers to create accounts, add or accumulate value, add alphanumeric sequences and convert. PSP system 38 allows managers to create and change business rules, monitor account activity and modify conversion rates and redemption rules.

10 IV. Random Win Engine

Random Win Engine software component 43, as illustrated in Fig. 4, allows brands to run promotions based on program-specific winning odds and sweepstakes modes. In this kind of program, consumers find out the reward upon activating their alphanumeric sequences through the platform.

15 This functionality allows a brand to create a program based on the following five different modes:

a) Instant-Win: Prizes

Reward: Special prizes served to consumers at random when they activate their alphanumeric sequences. All alphanumeric sequences have the same value, but only some consumers win grand prizes.

Example: "Activate your \$5 alphanumeric sequence and see if you are the winner of a trip to the Super Bowl!"

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5 b) Instant-Win: Value

Reward: Internet money served to consumers at random when they activate their alphanumeric sequences. Value of alphanumeric sequences ranges depending on the odds.

10 *Example:* “Activate your alphanumeric sequence and see how much Internet money it’s worth!”

c) Instant-Win: Online Retailer(s)

15 *Reward:* Specific online retailer(s) at which to redeem the offer, served to consumers at random when they activate their alphanumeric sequences. All alphanumeric sequences have the same monetary value; the specific online retailer where this value is good is served upon activation.

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Example: “Activate your \$10 alphanumeric sequence to see where you can instantly spend this money!”

5 d) Enter-to-Win

Reward: A few grand prizes. Consumers can enter to win at the site as part of the alphanumeric sequence activation process. Prizes are then awarded at random by conducting a drawing at a later date, once all entries have been received.

Example: "Enter your alphanumeric sequence for a chance to win \$100,000!"

15 e) Collect-and-Win

Reward: Users get their value once a "set" of game pieces (i.e. puzzle, matrix, etc.) is completed. Alphanumeric sequences act as the game pieces, and odds of completing sets are pre-determined and served to consumers at random every time they activate an alphanumeric sequence. In addition, some alphanumeric sequences can be pre-selected as winners of larger prizes to make the program more appealing.

Example: "Activate your alphanumeric sequence to uncover a section of the baseball diamond!"

5 The end result is a fully branded promotional program using the Internet as the rewarding vehicle, where an entity chooses what, how and when the rewards are given. Sweepstakes can power the program as a stand-alone feature, or can be combined with any other promotions to create/complement a larger program. In an embodiment of the present
10 invention, PSP system 38 can manage all legal aspects to comply with federal and state sweepstakes regulations.

PSP system 38 supports sweepstakes functions with a combination of database flagging and algorithms to award prizes, rewards and values. Through a set-up process, parameters on sweepstakes modes, odds of
15 winning, awarding mechanisms and online compliance with sweepstakes regulations for each program is set.

V. Tactical Repeat Purchase Engine

Many times, the goal of a promotion is to drive a specific minimum
20 quantity of product during a short period of time, as opposed to longer-term loyalty. In the traditional promotions world, the best way to achieve this goal is by enticing consumers to collect or to play games where rewards are based on the quantity of product purchased. Tactical Repeat Engine software component 44, as illustrated in Fig. 4, utilizes the functionality of a
25 PSP system 38 to run programs based on consumers completing a "set" that triggers the value once all the "pieces" have been collected. The Internet then functions as the place where consumers store individual

5 game pieces to complete the set, just as a board game would function in the traditional world.

Tactical Repeat Engine software component 44 has a Collect-and-Get/Games capability that allows entities to design fully branded collect-and-get or game programs that fit their promotion goals and allow
10 consumers to interact with their brands on the Internet. PSP system 38 also allows managers to specify the number of game pieces to activate different rewards.

Tactical Repeat Engine software component 44 is an Internet-enabled promotion based on the principles of short-term accumulation
15 (collect-and-get) and interaction (games, puzzles, etc.) launched from an entities own site, or from a site specifically created for the program. This feature is based on alphanumeric sequences delivered to consumers via the purchase of a product. Consumers then go to the entity's site to activate these alphanumeric sequences; once activated, these
20 alphanumeric sequences become "game pieces" that are presented to consumers as visual "pieces" of a game or puzzle that complete a set. Once a set (or sets) that activates a specific offer is completed, consumers redeem it online, either as real Internet money or as a specific offer/product at the online retailers participating in the program or at an electronic
25 warehouse created for the program. Additionally, Tactical Repeat Engine software component 44 allows managers to use dynamic business rules to adapt the number of products purchased required to complete the sets.

5 For example, consumers can receive bonus game pieces for buying specific Stock Keeping Units ("SKU") or buying the product during a specific time window.

PSP system 38 that supports Tactical Repeat Engine software component 44 functions on the principles of piece/alphanumeric sequence
10 accumulation and dynamic business rules for value redemption. Consumers create accounts, use their alphanumeric sequences to play games or fill in puzzles, and then redeem completed sets into Internet value (such as money). PSP system 38 allows managers to create and change business rules, monitor account activity and modify set completion
15 odds and redemption rules.

Key features of Tactical Repeat Engine software component 44 include rewards that are based on the quantity of product purchased; allows offline entities to develop fully-branded programs that fit their promotion goals; and provides an incentive for consumers to interact with
20 entities at their web site.

In addition to providing entities with PSP system 38 needed to create compelling Internet promotions, PSP system 38 empowers managers with valuable tools to use the information gathered through their programs to generate additional marketing opportunities. The data that is collected
25 during a program can be used to target consumers with tailor-made offers in the future. Specifically, the following database tools are available:

5 VI. Monitoring and Reporting

Monitoring and Reporting software component 45, as illustrated in Fig. 4, allows for monitoring and in-depth & timely reporting on the promotion, including:

- 10 a) Access to consumer psychographics' and demographic information as well as consumption patterns and online behavior;
- b) Data on promotion performance and key statistics;
- c) Programmable reporting tools;
- d) Ability to administer and change consumer surveys;
- e) Integration with targeted email marketing and ad serving
- 15 capabilities; and
- f) Plug-ins with other promotion technologies from other vendors.

VII. Email Campaigns

Emails Campaigns software component 46, as illustrated in Fig. 4, allows for the collection of email addresses from consumers. Entities can use email capabilities to conduct campaigns targeting these consumers either during the program or at any time in the future using text or HTML messages. In order to comply with the law and protect consumer privacy, entities can only send email offers and messages to consumers who have

20 provided their email addresses and opted to receive information during a

25 program.

5 VIII. Ad Serving

Ad Serving software component 47, as illustrated in Fig. 4, allows for data collected through a promotion to be integrated with ad serving technologies to target consumers with individualized offers based on their stated preferences and behavior.

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IX. Ongoing Services

Ongoing Services software component 48, as illustrated in Fig. 4, utilizes the data collected through a program to achieve any number of marketing goals, such as product sampling, consumer research, one-to-one marketing, or conducting other promotions based on the data captured.

15

X. Online Entities Participation

PSP system 38 empowers online entities with a powerful pay-for-performance mechanism to drive targeted traffic and sales to their web sites. Through the plug-and-play, web-based promotions infrastructure, online entities, such as online retailers, and offline branded consumer entities can use PSP system 38 to partner to create promotions that offer real value, such as electronic coupons, money and prizes, to their consumers.

20

An online entity can partner with an offline entity to execute a promotional program together with a promotion service provider. PSP system 38 allows the promotion to run seamlessly from the offline entities

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5 site to the online entities site, with no integration work required for the
online entity. Consumers get a alphanumeric sequence and PIN in the
offline world (through product packages, labels, stickers, cards or any other
form), which they activate through PSP system 38. The alphanumeric
sequence may be valid for a direct offer at an online retailer, an instant-win
10 or sweepstakes opportunity, or consumers may be required to collect
pieces or earn points before receiving a reward to use/spend at the online
retailer. Consumers are sent directly to the online entities site, where they
browse and select items to purchase as usual. PSP system 38 allows the
offline entities web site (or the site created for the promotion) to seamlessly
15 interface with the online retailer's site to apply the discount without the
consumer re-entering the alphanumeric sequence.

Online and offline entities implement promotions by creating a truly
low-risk, performance-based relationship. Offline entities usually pay for
printing and distribution of the alphanumeric sequences to their consumers;
20 advertising to support the promotional program; flags on packages to
display online retailers' logos and announce the promotion; and program
set-up and management fees, among other things. Online entities usually
pay for the value of the offer, with their own merchandise/services.

Participating in a promotion provided by PSP system 38 requires
25 relatively little, if any, integration time. An online entity provides a PSP
system 38 with a valid electronic coupon or gift certificate alphanumeric

5 sequences before the launch of a promotion. A processing device ties
these alphanumeric sequences to the PSP's alphanumeric sequences and
automatically inserts them in the appropriate field during the checkout
process in an embodiment of the present invention. Because PSP system
38 uses alphanumeric sequences that are recognized by the online
10 retailer's site, no (or minimal) changes to the online entities web sit is
required. In addition, the consumer never views the online retailer's
coupon or gift certificate alphanumeric sequences, so someone who has
not obtained an alphanumeric sequence through the promotion cannot use
them. The result is a seamless process to consumers and a hassle-free
15 process to online entities.

Participating in promotions according to an embodiment of the
present invention, provides online entities access to a true pay-for-
performance customer acquisition tool, with the following benefits:

- 20 a) Driving highly qualified, targeted traffic: By partnering offline
entities with online retailers that share similar consumer profiles, but
do not compete for the same dollars;
- b) Obtaining significant offline branding exposure: Promotional
programs are usually backed by communication initiatives that can
include packaging copy, TV advertising, free-standing inserts, print
25 copy and many other marketing communication media that brands

5 have always used to promote and communicate their promotions to consumers;

c) Building brand equity: By creating associations with strong offline entities that consumers have bought and trusted for years, online entities use the name, positioning and reputation of offline entities to
10 strengthen their own brand equity and communicate their positioning; and

d) Results-oriented programs: More and more, the marketing model in the online world is moving towards investing resources in results-oriented programs. This trend has also been occurring in the offline
15 world for the past ten years, as dollars are moved from advertising to tactical promotion budgets. A PSP system 38 empowers online entities to participate in these promotions to obtain truly qualified customers. To participate in these programs, online entities do not
20 need to perform any engineering integration or spend time sourcing offline entities, plus they only pay when a customer is acquired.

XI. System

Fig. 1 depicts the components of an embodiment of the present invention. Fig. 1 shows a client processing device 2 which can be a
25 personal computer or other device that is enabled to communicate on the Internet (e.g. telephone, web appliance, etc.). Client processing device 2 is

5 equipped with a browser that can communicate on the Internet. A
consumer would use client processing device 2 in order to transmit
alphanumeric sequences, redeem rewards and make purchases online. In
one embodiment, a user receives an award alphanumeric sequence in the
packaging of a product. The consumer will log on to the offline retailer's
10 web site by using client processing device 2 to access web site 4. Once
the consumer has been given an award (e.g. online coupon), the consumer
can access the online retailer's website 5 to redeem the award during a
purchase.

Offline retailer's web site 4 is a collection of web servers, application
15 servers, load balancers and firewalls that comprise and serve the retailer's
web site in an embodiment of the present invention. In an alternate
embodiment of the present invention, a single processing device is used to
host web site 4. Because the make up and structure of the retailer's web
site is not pertinent to the present invention, web site 4 is depicted
20 symbolically with one icon.

In an embodiment of the present invention, after a user accesses the
offline retailer's web site 4, the user will be provided with a link to the web
servers 20, 22, 24 and 26. When a user clicks on that link, the user is
redirected to web servers 20, 22, 24 and 26. Figure 1 shows a load
25 balancer 10 in communication with the Internet and four web servers: web
server 20, web server 22, web server 24 and web server 26. When a user

5 is redirected to the web servers 20, 22, 24 and 26, load balancer 10
determines which web server to redirect the communication (e.g.
HyperText Transfer Protocol ("HTTP") request) to based on the load of
each of the web servers. The web servers then communicate with
application servers 30 and 32. In one embodiment, a software load
10 balancer 28 is used to balance the load that the web servers demand on
the two application servers. The web servers are used to interface with
clients, including receiving HTTP requests and providing HTTP responses.
The web servers log transactions. If the request is a JHTM page or a
".dyn" file, then the web server passes the transaction directly to an
15 application server. If the request is anything else, then web servers serve
up the page. Application servers verify promotion alphanumeric sequences
or new customer requests if a new customer creates an entry in a database
and sets initial values. If the user supplies promotion alphanumeric
sequences, application servers determine the promotion to verify that the
20 alphanumeric sequence is acceptable. In an embodiment of the present
invention, the application servers serve up pages for alphanumeric
sequence specific promotions. In various alternatives, more or less than
four web servers can be used and more or less than two application
servers can be used.

25 Both application servers are in communication with shared database
34. Shared database 34 stores transaction logs, schemes, production

5 tables, user tables, gift certificate tables, merchant tables, survey tables,
system control tables, user tracking tables, sweepstakes tables and loyalty
tables.

In an embodiment of the present invention, PSP software 40 is
stored in application server 30 and 32, singly or in combination. In an
10 alternate embodiment of the present invention, PSP software 40 is stored
at offline retailer web site 4, and in particular a processing device for
providing offline retailer web site 4.

Fig. 2 illustrates a high-level block diagram of a processing device
80 which can be used for the components of the present invention. The
15 processing device 80 of Fig. 2 includes a processor unit 50 and main
memory 52. Processor unit 50 may contain a single microprocessor, or
may contain a plurality of microprocessors for configuring the processing
device as a multi-processor system. Main memory 50 stores, in part,
instructions and data for execution by processor unit 50. If the system of
20 the present invention is wholly or partially implemented in software, main
memory 52 can store the executable alphanumeric sequence when in
operation. Main memory 52 may include banks of dynamic random access
memory (DRAM) as well as high-speed cache memory. In an embodiment
of the present invention, memory 52 stores PSP software 40.

25 A processing device of Fig. 2 further includes a mass storage device
54, peripheral device(s) 56, user input device(s) 60, portable storage

5 medium drive(s) 62, a graphics subsystem 64 and an output display 66. In
an alternate embodiment of the present invention, more or less
components are provided. For purposes of simplicity, the components
shown in Fig. 2 are depicted as being connected via a single bus 68.
However, the components may be connected through one or more data
10 transport means. For example, processor unit 50 and main memory 52
may be connected via a local microprocessor bus, and the mass storage
device 54, peripheral device(s) 56, portable storage medium drive(s) 62,
and graphics subsystem 64 may be connected via one or more input/output
(I/O) buses. Mass storage device 54, which may be implemented with a
15 magnetic disk drive or an optical disk drive, is a non-volatile storage device
for storing data and instructions for use by processor unit 50. In an
embodiment of the present invention, mass storage device 54 stores the
PSP software 40 before loading to main memory 52.

Portable storage medium drive 62 operates in conjunction with a
20 portable non-volatile storage medium, such as a floppy disk, to input and
output data and alphanumeric sequence to and from a processing device of
Fig. 2. In an embodiment of the present invention, PSP software 40 is
stored on such a portable medium, and is input to processing device 80 via
the portable storage medium drive 62. Peripheral device(s) 56 may include
25 any type of computer support device, such as an input/output (I/O)
interface, to add additional functionality to processing device 80. For

5 example, peripheral device(s) 56 may include a network interface for connecting the processing device 80 to a network, a modem, a router, etc.

User input device(s) 60 provide a portion of a user interface. User input device(s) 60 may include an alpha-numeric keypad for inputting alpha-numeric and other information, or a pointing device, such as a
10 mouse, a trackball, stylus, or cursor direction keys. In order to display textual and graphical information, a processing device of Fig. 2 includes graphics subsystem 64 and output display 66. Output display 66 may include a cathode ray tube ("CRT") display, liquid crystal display ("LCD") or other suitable display device. Graphics subsystem 64 receives textual and
15 graphical information, and processes the information for output to display 66. Additionally, a processing device 80 of Fig. 2 includes output devices 58. Examples of suitable output devices include speakers, printers, network interfaces, monitors, etc.

The components contained in processing device 80 of Fig. 2 are
20 those typically found in computer systems suitable for use with an embodiment of the present invention, and are intended to represent a broad category of such computer components that are well known in the art. Thus, processing device 80 of Figure 2 can be a personal computer, workstation, server, minicomputer, mainframe computer, or any other
25 computing device. Processing device 80 can also include different bus configurations, networked platforms, multi-processor platforms, etc.

5 Various operating systems can be used including Unix, Linux, Windows,
Macintosh OS, Palm OS, and other suitable operating systems.

In an embodiment of the present invention, processing device 80 is
used as application server 30 illustrate in Fig. 1. In an alternate
embodiment of the present invention, processing device 80 is used as a
10 processing device for providing offline retailer web site 4.

XII. Method

Fig. 3 illustrates a method 300 for providing promotions over the
Internet according to an embodiment of the present invention. In an
15 embodiment of the present invention, method 300 is performed by software
components illustrated in Fig. 4. In an embodiment of the present
invention, a logic box or step illustrated in Fig. 3 may represent an
execution of a software component, such as a software program, a
software object, a software function, a software subroutine, a software
20 method, a software instance, a code fragment, singly or in combination. In
an alternate embodiment of the present invention, a logic box or step
represents execution of a software component, hardware operation, user
operation, or retailer operation, singly or in combination. In an alternate
embodiment of the present invention, fewer or more logic boxes or step are
25 carried out in method 300.

Method 300 initiates in step 98 by identifying a set of alphanumeric
sequences for use with a current promotion program. In step 100, an

5 entity, such as a manufacture of a product, applies an alphanumeric
sequence to the product. In an embodiment of the present invention, the
alphanumeric sequence is applied so that a consumer cannot see the
alphanumeric sequence until the consumer has purchased the product.
For example, the alphanumeric sequence can be placed on the inside of
10 packaging, or in an insert inside packaging for the product. In step 102, the
product is sold. After the product is sold, the consumer has access to the
alphanumeric sequence applied to the product. In addition to applying the
alphanumeric sequence to the product, the manufacture will also include a
Universal Resource Locator ("URL") (or other identifier) for redeeming a
15 prize or award associated with the alphanumeric sequence. The URL will
be placed in proximity to the alphanumeric sequence. In one embodiment,
the URL points to a web page of an offline retailer. In an embodiment of
the present invention, an offline retailer is the manufacturer who applied the
alphanumeric sequence in step 100. In another embodiment, an offline
20 retailer is the entity that sells the product (as opposed to the manufacturer).
In an alternative embodiment of the present invention, the URL is not
pointing to a web page for the offline retailer, but is pointing to a web page
provided by a promotion service provider. This web page of the promotion
service provider can be customized for the particular product or
25 manufacturer and (optionally) can be given the look and feel as if it was the
web page for the manufacturer/offline retailer.

5 In step 104, the consumer accesses the web site for the offline
retailer using the URL on the packaging. The web page for the offline
retailer will have a link to another page for redeeming the award associated
with the alphanumeric sequence. Typically, the web page will include the
text "Click here to redeem award alphanumeric sequence." In step 106, the
10 consumer selects the link to receive the award and the consumer's browser
is directed to a web page for providing information to redeem the award. In
an embodiment of the present invention, the web page pointed to by the
link for redirection is provided by the web servers (e.g. 20, 22, 24, 26 of
PSP system 38). In another embodiment of the present invention, the web
15 page pointed to by the link in step 106 is on the web server or processing
device for an offline retailer. In step 108, the consumer provides the
alphanumeric sequence, personal information and survey information into
one or more web pages. In an embodiment of the present invention, the
web page is used to accept the information that is provided by web servers
20 20, 22, 24, and 26 of the promotion's service provider. The personal
information may include user name, log in information and demographic
information. In an embodiment of the present invention, if a user has
already entered the personal information, a user need only input a user
name and password. If all the information is provided appropriately in step
25 108, the consumer's account receives value, such as an electronic coupon
and/or award, in step 110. In an embodiment of the present invention,
application servers 30 and/or 32 verify that the alphanumeric sequence

5 entered in step 108 applies to an appropriate promotion and determines the value for that promotion. In an embodiment of the present invention, the user has an option to choose from a set of values. An example of a value is a \$5.00 off electronic coupon at an online retailer. In an alternate embodiment of the present invention, values cannot be accumulated. In 10 other embodiments of the present invention, values can be accumulated.

At any point after step 110, directly subsequent to or much later in time, the consumer can access the online retailer 5 in step 112 associated with the value. While accessing the online retailer (including accessing web pages for the online retailer), the user can choose an item to purchase 15 in step 114. Typically, an online retailer will have a shopping cart. As a user chooses items, they are placed in a shopping cart. A user is provided a link to "check out." When the user clicks "check out," the user fills in all the information to purchase the item in step 116. After filling out all of the information, the user will click on a link for completing the transaction. After 20 the user selects that link, the system automatically redeems the discount in step 118 and lowers the purchase price by the amount of the value. In step 120, the transaction is completed at the lower cost due to the discount from the value. One embodiment for performing steps 112-120 is discussed in the patent application incorporated by reference "Method and System for 25 Proxying Web Pages" cited above. A web page for the online retailer is proxied by a promotion service provider so that when the user checks out,

5 a user never has to know or enter a coupon number into a web page for the
online retailer. PSP system 38 automatically enters the coupon number
into the web page. The promotional service provider gets the coupon from
the online retailer for purposes of the promotion.

10 In an embodiment of the present invention, PSP system 38 does not
store alphanumeric sequences for each product sold. Rather,
alphanumeric sequences are printed on packaging for the products and
application servers 30 and 32 receive the alphanumeric sequences and
enter the alphanumeric sequences into a decoding formula which
determines whether they are valid or not.

15 Note that with the proxying of the online retailer's web site, the online
retailer does not need to make any changes to its web site in order to
participate in the promotion. In another alternative, the online retailer can
create a fake product that is equal to -\$5.00 or -\$10.00, etc. depending on
the amount of the value and step 118 would include adding that fake
20 product to the shopping cart to reduce the amount of the purchase price by
the value.

XIII. Conclusion

25 The foregoing detailed description of the invention has been
presented for purposes of illustration and description. It is not intended to
be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise form disclosed. Many

